



National Center for Environmental Health
Division of Emergency and Environmental Health Services

Childhood Lead Poisoning

What Is the Problem?

Approximately 310,000 U.S. children aged 1–5 years have blood lead levels greater than 10 micrograms of lead per deciliter of blood, a level at which harmful health effects are known to occur.

Lead poisoning can affect nearly every system in the body. Because lead poisoning often occurs with no obvious symptoms, it frequently goes unrecognized. Lead poisoning can cause learning disabilities, behavioral problems, and, at very high levels, seizures, coma, and even death.



How Are Children Exposed to Lead?

The major source of lead exposure among U.S. children is lead-based paint and lead-contaminated dust found in deteriorating buildings. Lead-based paints were banned for use in housing in 1978. However, approximately 24 million housing units in the United States have deteriorated leaded paint and elevated levels of lead-contaminated house dust. More than 4 million of these dwellings are home to one or more young children.

Other sources of lead poisoning are related to

- home health remedies (arzacón and greta, which are used for upset stomach or indigestion; pay-loo-ah, which is used for rash or fever),
- some imported candies (specifically those from Mexico),
- imported toy jewelry,
- drinking water (lead pipes, solder, brass fixtures, and valves can all leach lead),
- work (recycling or making automobile batteries), and
- hobbies (making stained-glass windows).

Who Is at Risk?

- Children under the age of 6 years because they are growing so rapidly and because they tend to put their hands or other objects into their mouths.
- Children from all social and economic levels can be affected by lead poisoning, although children living at or below the poverty line who live in older housing are at greatest risk.
- Children of some racial and ethnic groups and those living in older housing are disproportionately affected by lead. For example, 3% of black children compared to 1.3% of white children have elevated blood lead levels.

Can Lead Poisoning Be Prevented?

Lead poisoning is entirely preventable. The key is stopping children from coming into contact with lead and treating children who have been poisoned by lead.

- Lead hazards in a child's environment must be identified and removed safely.
- Parents, health care professionals, and the general public need education about lead poisoning and how to prevent it.
- Children who are at risk for lead poisoning need to be tested, and, if necessary, treated.

What Can Parents and the Public Do to Reduce Blood Lead Levels?

- Ask a doctor to test your child if you are concerned about your child being exposed to lead.
- Talk to your state or local health department about testing paint and dust from your home for lead if you live in a house or apartment built before 1978, especially if young children live with you or visit you.
- Damp-mop floors; damp-wipe surfaces; and frequently wash a child's hands, pacifiers, and toys to reduce exposure to lead.
- Avoid using home remedies (such as arzacón, greta, pay-loo-ah) and cosmetics (such as kohl, alkohol) that contain lead.
- At this time, children and pregnant women should not eat candies imported from Mexico.
- Use only cold water from the tap for drinking, cooking, and making baby formula. Hot water is more likely to contain higher levels of lead, and most of the lead in household water usually comes from the plumbing in your house, not from the local water supply.
- Take basic steps to decrease your exposure to lead (for example, by showering and changing clothes after finishing the task) if you remodel buildings built before 1978 or if your work or hobbies involve working with lead-based products.

CDC's Role in Preventing Lead Poisoning

- CDC provides technical and financial assistance to state and local childhood lead poisoning prevention programs. These programs are working to ensure that screening, lead-hazard reduction, new legislation, and other prevention mechanisms occur throughout the country.
- CDC has established a national system to identify children with elevated blood lead levels.
- CDC provides guidance for the proper care of children after they are identified as having elevated blood lead levels.
- CDC provides national guidance and policy for the prevention of childhood lead poisoning. CDC will continue to work with state and local areas to improve capacity and provide guidance.

For more information:

Visit the CDC Web site (<http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead/lead.htm>) or call the National Lead Information Center at 1-800-424-LEAD (5323).

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